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SUBJECT: BJP TROUBLES CONTINUE AS IN-FIGHTING ERUPTS OVER LEADERSHIP IN MADHYA PRADESH

Summary

1. (SBU) Firebrand politician Uma Bharati, the deposed former chief minister of Madhya Pradesh (MP), has launched a public fight to return to power, embarrassing her Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the process and dividing its MP members into two camps. Bharati succeeded in getting the support of a large number of BJP parliamentarians, and rumors have circulated that Congress would be willing to support a Bharati-led government if she and her supporters decided to break away from the BJP. The national BJP leadership interceded and threatened her supporters with disciplinary action. It now appears that both sides of the Bharati debate have decided to table their battle until after the last round of Bihar elections on November 19. If Bharati's past behavior gives any indication of her future plans, however, we can expect her to make herself heard again after the truce expires and launch yet another attempt to be reinstated as chief minister in Bhopal. The internal battle over Bharati is yet another symbol of the fractures within the BJP as it struggles to re-define its role in Indian politics. End summary.

Background: Firebrand Bharati's Attempts to Regain Power

2. (SBU) Uma Bharati was elected as the first female chief minister of Madhya Pradesh in December 2003. Bharati is viewed as a firebrand politician from a so-called backward caste with a broad grassroots base in a party whose top leadership - with the notable exception of president LK Advani - are mostly upper caste Hindus with little individual political base of their own. In August 2004, facing a sudden arrest warrant on a 10-year old charge, Bharati stepped down under pressure from the BJP national leadership. Many of her supporters believed that Bharati fell victim to a dirty political trick played on her by second-rung MP BJP leaders who felt threatened by Bharati's popularity. The current MP chief minister, Babulal Gaur, took over from Bharati. Within a month, she was acquitted and demanded reinstatement, but the BJP stood by her hand-selected successor.

3. (SBU) On the losing end of backroom party machinations, Bharati began publicly airing her grievances, and ultimately incurred a party suspension in December 2004 for confronting BJP leaders on television. As a populist, Bharati continues to enjoy strong grass-roots support with lower caste groups. In late summer, the BJP leadership decided to capitalize on her popularity to support the party's campaign efforts in Bihar, since Bharati's mass appeal and caste credentials are seen as a valuable counterweight to rival parties there.

Internal BJP Dispute Erupts over Bharati's Political Future

4. (SBU) In the past week, however, new public sparring erupted between the BJP's pro- and anti-Bharati factions, as the first round of the Bihar elections was set to begin. The media reported that party president LK Advani discussed - and may have endorsed - reinstating Bharati as chief minister during an October 15 meeting of BJP general secretaries. Advani may have recognized Bharati's continued grass-roots appeal with voters and many BJP MLAs in the MP state parliament, whereas current CM Gaur is viewed as less popular and far more subservient to the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) and its leader KS Sudarshan, with whom Advani remains in a tense rivalry.

5. (SBU) Bharati herself has never given up on her attempts to regain power, and may have demanded the CM job in return for her support of the BJP in Bihar. In any case the party's second-rung leadership vigorously opposed Advani's attempt to placate Bharati. According to one party insider, the second-rung leadership successfully argued that the party should not contemplate any leadership changes until the Bihar elections conclude on November 19. Post sources have told us that the delay is actually a ploy by Bharati's opponents to sabotage her attempts to regain power. Moreover, RSS leader Sudarshan, while not in attendance at the event, reportedly opposed Advani taking any major decisions, such as replacing chief ministers, two months prior to his announced resignation as BJP president.

6. (SBU) Perhaps smelling a rat, Bharati bolted from the general secretaries' meeting and unsuccessfully sought an audience with

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Sudershan. Spurned by the RSS leader, Bharati published a letter instigating a public signature campaign to remove Chief Minister Gaur from office. According to news reports, within a day over 80 BJP parliamentarians had signed on to Bharati's letter. Bharati reportedly had the support of three state ministers and several former ministers. Bharati also leaked a letter she wrote to the RSS chief in which she criticized RSS leaders for unfairly interfering in MP BJP affairs, echoing earlier complaints that party president Advani had made regarding RSS interference in party matters.

17. (SBU) In response, the BJP immediately called another general secretaries' meeting on October 17 and announced that the party

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had not received a "proposal" for any leadership changes. Observers clearly understood the statement to mean that the party is using a matter of procedure to avoid controversy, as Bharati's letter is not a "proposal" under party rules -- a technicality that does nothing to conceal the fact that over half of the party's MP members openly revolted. Afterwards, the BJP president for MP held individual woodshed meetings with signatories to explain that the national leadership is in no mood to hear their demands, and a BJP spokesperson warned that "disciplinary action [will be] taken against those who have gone public." The party was also rumored to have yanked Bharati from campaigning in Bihar, but later said that she would continue to campaign there as originally planned.

Congress To Support a Breakaway Bharati Government?

18. (SBU) Embassy Delhi reports that there is growing speculation in the capital that Bharati has opened negotiations with Congress, which may be prepared to back Bharati if she broke with her supporters to form a new government in MP. While the Congress had reportedly indicated it would support her government from the outside, Delhi's sources believe that Congress actually hoped to split the BJP in MP, destroying its credibility there, and then, at an opportune time, pull out and bring Bharati down. However, in a series of meetings in Bhopal on October 19 Bharati's supporters decided to bide their time until after the final round of the Bihar elections on November 19. Staunch Bharati supporters gave clear statements indicating that they would prefer to fight from within the party, squashing rumors of an impending breakaway BJP government with outside Congress support.

Comment

19. (SBU) The BJP appears to have decided to bury its differences over Uma Bharati until after the Bihar elections. The party, already weakened by a variety of internal power struggles and its future course in serious dispute, cannot afford to implode in MP during the critical Bihar elections. Bharati seems determined to regain the CM position in Bhopal, however, and if her past behavior offers any guidance, we can expect her to make herself be heard after November 19. Bharati's machinations will now move from public view to behind closed doors, making it more difficult to determine whether she has enough backing to compel the BJP leadership, either under lame-duck Advani or a new leader, to reinstate her as CM. Despite her grassroots appeal, Bharati remains a loose cannon, a nuisance and perhaps even a threat to much of the BJP second-tier leadership. With this group and the RSS against her, she is fighting an uphill battle. The party is unlikely to silence her, however, and she will continue to disrupt the BJP. Uma Bharati's plight is another visible symbol of the BJP's internal fractures as it attempts to re-define its place in Indian politics. End comment.

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